Charity vs Mutual Aid
Charity = those with power helping those with less. It exists within legal/ tax structures with hierarchy, controlled vertically by the rich. The very act reinforces power dynamics. It's also a legal way for the rich to launder money and reputation.
Mutual Aid = people helping each other because we all need help sometimes depending on the situation. It exists outside legal/tax structures, controlled horizontally without hierarchy, truly democratically. The very act disrupts power dynamics, showing participants that a non-capitalist world is possible.

With every act of mutual aid, seeds of resistance are sown. **Mutual aid is a revolutionary act in a capitalist society.** It's a tool—it's not the revolution itself. It's the daily work of building structures to create and sustain actual change. It expands solidarity and builds movements.

Mutual aid is non-hierarchical organization. It's participatory, solving problems through direct collective action rather than waiting for saviors or permission. It's autonomous and scrappy so it can adapt and act quickly to meet emerging problems better than other kinds of organizations. It's free of barriers, means-testing, hoops to jump through, legal status/sobriety/etc etc requirements. Mutual Aid groups adapt as they work, aiming to meet needs in the long term, learning from mistakes and growing as they work together.

What Is Mutual Aid?

It's solidarity, not charity.

It knows that the systems are to blame for the crises, not the people in crisis.

It's about liberation and participation.

It includes an invitation to collective action.

It empowers ordinary people to actually create social change instead of being passive.

It builds connections between people.

It's both for big disasters and everyday life.

It's scrappy and imperfect, and that's okay.

Mutual Aid

A note about the "mutual" part Some get too caught up in the word "mutual", mistakenly confusing mutual aid with barter. There's no need to offer something in return to a person or group offering something to you in a mutual aid context. Think of the mutual as more big-picture. I might be giving away mending kits at a resource fair to anyone who needs or wants one, and I might walk around the fair grabbing masks from my local mask bloc and zines and whatever else looks cool. There may be no overlap between who I gave kits to and who I'm taking from, we're just all there giving what we have and getting what we need. Or, bigger picture: You may offer food through free fridges or Food Not Bombs for years, needing nothing from your community for yourself, until the day you do. And when that day comes, the community will be there for you to offer what you need.

Mutual aid projects have a dual simultaneous goal:
1. Work to meet a community's needs.
2. Build shared understanding about why people do not have what they need (aka, political education and outreach).

Real-life examples Setting up car pooling during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Gathering people to defend spaces for queer events like drag story hours. The Cajun Navy, an unofficial network of boat owners responding to hurricanes when emergency services were too slow or simply completely absent. Working out logistics to connect people with abortion services when illegal (eg: Jane Collective in Chicago). Handing out water, food, narcan, masks, coats, blankets, etc, directly to people: for a disaster, for a protest, for living outside (Food Not Bombs, Really Really Free Market, Free Stores). Jail support: giving folks basic help and transportation when released. Free breakfast program, medical care, transportation (Black Panthers). Art therapy as community service; gathering art supplies for protests. Folks finding ways to build heaters out of cheap materials that are tip-over safe and good to heat a tent or room, and then giving them for free to whoever wants one and freely sharing plans on how to build more. Neighborhood free fridges, where folks keep refrigerators/pantries facing public sidewalks stocked with food (re-supplied by members of the community) for anyone. Radical accountants helping others to navigate the tax or grant system, or help nonprofit or mutual aid orgs deal with fundraising/bookkeeping. Folks with optometry skills giving eye exams and glasses to anyone. Musicians and sound people gathering equipment and knowledge to put on events large and small. Trans community help: free transportation to treatments, binders, healthcare fundraising. People who know how to sew/mend repairing clothes, sleeping bags, tents, and teaching people to mend things for themselves. Folks with varying degrees of first responder training learning together and training others on how to safely and effectively deploy first aid when protesters are inevitably hurt by chud militias or cops. Free childcare provided to parents so they can attend community organizing meetings, court dates, jobs or interviews, etc. **If you have a skill you want to put to use for MA, see if folks in your area are already doing it so you can join them, and if not then you can just start your own thing!**

What does it look like in practice? Example: Food support. **Early stage:** The group needs to coordinate some basic logistics. How many people can access a kitchen? How much food can be made in how much time? Are donations needed? Who has transportation for delivery? They also must be in touch with their community, to be aware of what specific needs they should be trying to meet. Halal? Vegan? **Next stage:** For food support, getting hot meals, meat preferred, out to people in tents is identified as the most significant need. Who can cook what? Who can deliver? In what containers? Are there enough people to trade jobs and take time off so people aren't burning out? Who can donate? Who can fundraise? What other orgs can be reached out to to help get more volunteers involved? How does the group get out the political message of mutual aid? Impromptu conversations? Zines? Social Media? Guerilla Theater? Puppet Shows?

Where the group ends up coming together in the bigger picture: Imagine a major protest action, like occupying the lawn and stairs in front of a building for weeks. Immediately, the group can pivot to provide skills and logistical support, and they don't need to coordinate with anyone else. They just show up on day one, ready to share food. Immediately, they are getting in touch with the people there to identify needs, and adapting again. Rinse and repeat. Except now, imagine everyone in a mutual aid community showing up to a major action. Food, drinks, clothing, defense, heating, first aid, signs, banners, trash collection, transportation, sound systems, fundraising, etc. it's all there and ready to adapt in real time to whatever is needed. This works remarkably well for climate disaster relief, major protest or long union actions, tons of situations.

Beyond this flier
Dean Spade (dean spade.net) literally wrote the book on mutual aid, *Mutual Aid*, released by Verso books in 2021. It's a short, accessible book with a great audiobook that's probably available through your public library, and is also free on YouTube. If you're a podcast person, Dean Spade has appeared on lots of different podcast episodes explaining or discussing mutual aid, so just search his name in your app to find some excellent conversations! **So many thanks to Dean Spade for explaining mutual aid—much of this little intro flier was adapted from his words!** For a more historical read, Peter Kropotkin wrote the original book on the subject, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution.* It may not be as relevant to our lives today but it will give context if you're interested in learning. The Illuminated version released by PM Press in '21 is illustrated by Portland artist N.O. Bonzo and is absolutely gorgeous.